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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

175
#Argentina

Declassified Case: NW 54088 Date:
10-13-2013

DATE: January 28, 1977

SUBJECT: Military Rule, Human Rights and U. S. Policy

PARTICIPANTS: Dr. Emilio Fermin Mignone, former Rector of the University of Lujan and member of Argentine Permanent Assembly for Human Rights
ARA/ECA - Fernando E. Rondon

COPIES TO: ARA - Mr. Bray, Mr. Lister; NSC - Mr. Pastor; INR/OIL/B
ARA/ECA - Mr. Zimmermann, Mr. Graham, Mr VanTreeck
L - Mr. Runyon, Ms. Armstrong; DOD - Colonel Thomas
D/HA - Mr. Spear; American Embassy, B.A. - Mr. Smith
H - Mr. Pezzulo, Mr. Black, Ms. Swift
EB - Mr. Winder, Mr. Thomas
INR - Mr. Buchanan; American Embassy, B.A., Ambassador Hill

Dr. Mignone is visiting Washington in connection with consultant services he performs for the OAS and IDB. He told me that he worked for the OAS in Washington from 1962-67, had served as Under Secretary at the Ministry of Education under Generals Ongania, Levingston and Lanusse, and from 1973-76 was Rector of the new federal university at Lujan. The Videla government dismissed him in March because rector's posts are considered political. His daughter was kidnapped in May. Since then Dr. Mignone has sought desperately to locate his daughter.

Mignone talked about Argentina for almost two hours. He said that he was a personal friend of Italo Luder and greatly regretted that the Senator had not had the courage to replace Mrs. Peron as President, thereby providing a Constitutional response to Argentina's problems under Isabel Peron. A coup became inevitable and was generally desired.

1. Military Rule

Mignone commented that unlike previous military (and civilian) presidents, Videla was not Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. Videla's powers were carefully circumscribed by the Air Force and Navy so that the Junta would be the supreme authority. This has left Argentina without a government because decisions cannot be taken except in the economic field under Martinez de Hoz.

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Throughout the conversation Mignone criticized the political acumen of Argentina's military. He claimed that Ongania was far more talented than the current group but not even Ongania proved capable of legitimizing his authority by involving civilians. Mignone stated that he had repeatedly urged Ongania to permit a Congress to function (something which Brazil does).

In the fight against terrorism Mignone said that the Argentine military were following the tactics used by the French in Algeria and to a lesser extent those used by the Uruguayan military against the Tupamaros.

The Argentine military decided that they would have to battle the underground with underground tactics. Counter-terror would have to be secret if the families of the counterterrorists were to be protected from left wing retaliation. In addition, it would be fair to acquire booty which explains the robbery facet of right wing operations. The military also decided that they were engaged in a war and, as in all wars, innocent people would suffer. It would be necessary to torture to get information. This might mean that they tortured 500 to find one person who provided useful intelligence.

The military government also decided that each military commander would be free to operate in his area of responsibility, making life and death decisions. The military leadership agreed not to ask or receive information. I know this is so, Mignone said, because there are 35 children of military officers under detention. The parents cannot ask about them and those holding them are not to tell anyone they are being held. The Army colonel who is holding the 35 military dependents supposedly gave this information to Mignone.

Mignone emphasized the all out nature of the conflict. The military live in terror, he said. Even a retired colonel who was selling vegetables was killed. No one dare wear his uniform.

The military have decided that there can be no redemption for the guerrillas. This has lead to a fatalistic attitude by the guerrillas who know they will die either in battle or tortured. As a result, many carry cyanide pills.

There is no regard for innocent casualties. If the military decide to capture one man in one house, large areas are surrounded and often sprayed with machine gun fire. Bystanders get killed.

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In sum, politics have been subordinated to war in Argentina.

Mignone fears that persecution will grow greater and greater in Argentina as more and more people question what the military are doing, and more and more people have to be silenced. He estimated that 10,000 to 20,000 people have disappeared. He guessed that 20% are dead.

He commented that only the military are in a position to challenge current policy. Mignone feels that Admiral Massera has great ambitions and is capable of challenging the Army by force, despite history's lessons of the past when the Army has put down Navy revolts with loss of life.

He described the Navy as an extremely hermetic, unified service with many fixed ideas. The Army is more flexible and represents more tendencies. The Air Force has sided tactically with the Navy; its officers are pre-Vatican II men.

2. Church Persecution

The Navy is in charge of progressive Catholics. He explained that he knew a good deal about the Navy because he is certain that his daughter was abducted by the Navy. He described the story of Fathers Orlando IORIO and Francisco JALICS, whom the Navy kidnapped on May 14, presumably because the priests worked among the poor. These men were hooded and had their hands and feet in cuffs for five months. They survived by practicing yoga and prayer. The first days of their imprisonment they were held at the Naval Mechanical School. They received shots of sodium pentothal to make them talk. Later the priests were moved to a house in Buenos Aires, or so they thought, because of the sound of traffic around them. Finally, they were given injections which put them to sleep. They woke up in the countryside, some hundred kilometers from Buenos Aires. People in the area said a helicopter had been in the area late at night. The release came a few days before the October Episcopal Conference. Both men are now overseas; Jalics is in Cleveland.

Mignone said that he talked to Father Iorio after his release and he remembered being questioned about Monica Mignone. Mignone stated that he had told the Army that the priests were being held by the Navy and this may have contributed to the release. According to Mignone, Admiral Montes, in a moment of boastful indiscretion, admitted to him that the Navy had the priests; Mignone told the Army. Up until then the Army had been unable to find the priests and seemed convinced they were dead; Mignone believes the Army. And to protect himself, Mignone told Montes that he had written a letter in which he states that Montes ordered his death.

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3. Monica Mignone

We discussed Dr. Mignone's daughter, Monica. She was abducted in May along with two couples. Monica was suspect because she worked among the poor, was connected with the progressive Church, was young, was a psychological therapist, belonged to the Peronist Youth, and was the friend of a girl who belonged to the Partido Autentico. (Mignone explained that the Partido has Montonero connections. The girl's father is a retired Navy Captain, and he cannot find his daughter either.)

Mignone said that he would not leave Argentina as long as there is hope that his daughter is alive. If he loses hope, he said he would emigrate and devote his energies to fight the government.

He estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 people have disappeared. He guessed that 20% are dead.

4. Defense of Human Rights

I asked Mignone, who is a member of the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights, why the Catholic Church does not work on behalf of political prisoners. Why is it so different from Chile?

He replied that there was never leftist terrorism in Chile and this puts the Argentine Church in a difficult position because it is opposed to all sorts of violence. In Chile, the MIR never passed to a guerrilla stage. Furthermore, the Church in Argentina has conservative leadership as opposed to Chile's dynamic Cardinal Silva. In Chile, in fact, the Church runs what amounts to a ministry: the Vicarate for Solidarity. It has 500 people working to help the unemployed, the hungry and political prisoners. It has lawyers to present writs of habeas corpus for those who request help irrespective of political philosophy. Mignone noted that the Protestant World Council of Churches is funding Chilean Catholic Church activities. He added that the Church in Chile is in the vanguard of what he called a new evangelization of Chile.

The Liga Argentina por los Derechos del Hombre is an Argentine Communist party organization founded in 1930. Mignone discounted Communist efforts on behalf of human rights, saying they are really a tiny party albeit one with a good bureaucracy.

Lawyers are not defending political prisoners, he noted, because many have died. They are simply afraid.

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5. American Policy

We finally turned to the question of U.S. policy. Mignone remarked that Carter's election cast a pall of mourning over the Casa Rosada (the Presidency).

He urged that we talk very frankly to the Argentines. Explain to them that the United States does not want to put Argentina in a corner or isolate them. This is very important, Mignone explained, because they military worry greatly about Brazil. He also urged that not only State and international organizations urge human rights improvements. The military think that these organizations are full of bolsheviks, he said. You must talk to the Argentine military through the Pentagon.

He recommended cutting military assistance. After some discussion, he agreed fully that, for now, a cutback and not a termination might be more advisable action if our military were to have opportunities to talk to their Argentine counterparts. Mignone had no fear that a denial of assistance might result in Argentine cooperation with the USSR. The military are paranoid about the Marxists, he said. The United States is their only alternative.

Dr. Mignone will be meeting with various Congressional staffers, including Drinan's and Fraser's offices.

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